Constructing citizenship in school: the students' experiences and perspectives

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Introduction

This research is part of a larger project *Citizenship and Scientific Literacy for all students,* which questions citizenship education and literacy and how recent European policies are reflected in Portuguese policies and daily school practices. This paper starts with two sets of assumptions. One concerns the impact of neo-liberal contexts on educational policies and school organisation. The other considers the policy of citizenship and its social construction in various spaces. The paper addresses two questions: (1) to what extent have citizenship policies inspired the philosophy behind the school educational project? (2) in what curricular places do students learn about citizenship? The first focuses on the analysis of the Portuguese State curricular policies and specific modes of appropriation by the school. The second brings together empirical data, both qualitative and documentary, from a case study of a suburban school (Grades 7 to 12), with an emphasis on the students' subjective experiences and conceptions of citizenship developed in the school cultural context. Although there is some evidence suggesting a lack of consistency among curricular issues, the content of school texts, and what goes on in classrooms, further research addressing particular contexts of schools is needed.

Citizenship: multidimensionality and plurality of meanings

The idea of school as cultural, social and political space where students develop their cultural identities and a personal sense of citizenship and meanings of democracy has been asserted in public and official discourse, frequently and with growing intensity. In the face of current global social and economic transformations, and their impact on the school local policies, it appears that, at the level of the Portuguese official discourse, schools are given a unique responsibility for education citizenship. It is as if they are accountable for solving contemporary social illnesses and educational crisis that parallel world-wide changes. Successful education for citizenship would indeed prevent inequities, violence, intolerance, fundamentalism of diverse kinds, and increase participation in political decisions. In this sense, one might consider that the State expects schools to 'pedagogise' social problems. Furthermore, citizenship can be thought to revert towards neo-liberal policies, that tend to reduce citizens to a consumer of both public and private services. Indeed according to the different interpretations of the factors of neo-liberal and globalisation (Vandenberg, 2000), divergent proposals have potential for influencing education policies.

As the analysis of the literature shows, different readings of citizenship support divergent views about education for citizenship and curricula organisation in schools. One reading directs us to the development of the knowledge society, and emphasises the acquisition of competences the knowledge economy needs and imposes. In contrast, other readings stress the learning and practice of democracy in various spaces, focusing not only on voting and participation but also on political and social commitment in common cause, as the driving force for social and educational equity. Both underline the expectation that school policies must be successful in developing the necessary competences to live in the knowledge society. Yet the second perspective raises critical arguments against the first, while standing for values of social justice and equity, education for critical reflexivity, and forms of conviviality opposing to practices of individualism and competition.

A central question is whether or not a unifyied view of citizenship is possible, particularly taking into consideration the complexity of identity, participation, and multicultural interactions. A sense of belonging to a political and jurisdictional community, in which people have the right to act as equals (Delanty, 2000), the development of a 'collective conscience' and a common will would indeed cement and sustain the idea and practice of citizenship (Touraine, 1998, p 268). Another essential condition would be the practice of civics, a civic virtue (Bellanger, 2002) that requires abiding to the community's regulatory norms and the primacy of the common good over the private interest (Lister, 1997; Smoes, 2002).

Citizenship has been conceptualised in non-linear ways and accrued with multiple meanings, leading either to a narrow or to more holistic understandings. Perspectives assuming diverse schools of thought, from Dewey (1916/1966), Bruner (1996), Morin (2002), Delors *et al*. (1996) to Giroux (1993) and Freire (1997), all share the need for educating students to being able and willing to assume critical and reflexive attitudes conducive to social transformation. Edgar Morin goes further in his understanding of an *anthropo-ethic* as the essential condition for developing a planetary citizenship, and a dialectical articulation of democracy and citizenship. If 'citizens produce democracy which in turn produces the citizens', 'the regeneration of civics presupposes the regeneration of solidarity and responsibility' (pp.115-121) indeed. An important point yet is that learning citizenship and democracy in connection with each other requires democratic and civic schools.

Citizenship policies in Portugal: from civic education to education for citizenship

Citizenship policies in Portugal acquired a centrality and greater educational impact in the beginning of the twentieth century with the introduction of the *Moral and Civic Instruction,* substituted by another course called *Religion and Moral* in the 1950s. In the sequence of the 1974 revolution, two other courses —*Civic and Polytechnic Education* and *Introduction to Politics* —were introduced in school curricula, although they were discontinued as political normalisation started. Despite strong controversy, the discourse favouring the teaching of citizenship has remained visible in successive curricular reforms from the 1980s to the present. As the *Main Law of Education* issued in 1986 determined, civic education had a transversal role and appeared in the curricula under

diverse designations: *School Area*, *Personal and Social Development* and *Education for Citizenship*. In this curricular and policy context, research is needed to ascertain the question of the coherence between legislated mandates for citizenship and the formal and informal practices in school.

The *Blue School* citizenship policy and its educational project philosophy

The *Blue school*[1] educational project, titled 'A school of everybody for everybody', presupposes a selection of values and encompasses three main attributes - a 'school-home', a 'sense of belonging' and 'sharing experiences and challenges' - leading to attitudes of solidarity and openness to the world and an harmonious construction of the students' identities.

The school foundational values
The analysis of the curricular and complementary projects identified organisational processes aiming at integrating principles, values and strategic action planned in the light of the diagnosis concerning school needs and problems. This description regards only the data concerning education for citizenship. As Table 1 shows, Blue School adopted values that form the educational philosophy for curricular policies and practices. Among them, are the guiding principles and values of a diverse nature: a social orientation, a democratic organisation and functioning, a pedagogical perspective based on caring, and curricular flexibility. The development of citizenship competencies is thought and planned as a transversal dimension that encompasses intellectual curiosity, acquisition of study skills, creativity, attitudes of cooperation, and social intervention. These competencies, either cognitive or social and pedagogical, are to be put in practice through the work projects developed in the specific context of each class curricular plan. In accordance to recent legislation (Decree-law nº 6/2001), citizenship education explicitly appears as a curricula area although circumscribed between the 1st and 10th grades. Nonetheless, this school project goes beyond official determinations while extending citizenship education to the secondary level. As the text of the Blue school project states, such decision is justified on the following grounds:

> There is space for imprinting an ethical dimension to every act of knowing. Citizenship values may and should be present in all disciplines while approaching questions such as human rights, the culture of peace, preserving nature, protection of patrimony, respect for the elderly, cultural diversity, solidarity, civics, and being sensitive to local problems. Each discipline should search for the best ways to developing full citizens (PE99/02, p. 56).

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[1] This is the pseudonym attributed to the school involved in the research project in order to maintain confidentiality.

Table 1. Principles and values as foundation for the School Educational Project

SOCIAL	- Valuing plurality and inclusion - Respecting norms of conviviality and cooperation - Tolerance, solidarity, and peace
CARING	- Valuing feelings - Dialogue
PEDAGOGICAL	- Commitment to all students' development - Emphasis on durable and useful competencies
ORGANISATIONAL	- Promoting school autonomy - Efficacy of communication and information
CURRICULAR	- Articulating diverse areas of knowledge - Developing transversal competencies - Valuing the project work
DEMOCRATIC	- Respecting democratic principles of participation and representation - Transparency and truth in the school organisational functioning - Developing sense of responsibility and co-responsibility
NORMATIVE	- Maintaining a school climate of social order - Valuing the law as source of duties and rights - Abiding the law

It is the school policy to give priority to specific projects that relate to the domain of citizenship education, such as developing autonomy and a sense of responsibility; multicultural education and school integration; making cultural identity strong; and respecting human rights.

School Policy Dilemmas

The data analysis identified school policies oriented by social and cultural values as the main foundation for school project organisational and curricular axes. The organisational axis is structured and based on an earlier analyses, so that it anchors principles, objectives, and strategic action. In this way, school policies traverse and combine three vectors: *diversity*, *inclusion*, and *success*. Among these, *inclusion* appears to be dominant and valued by the teachers' beliefs. Yet this consensus hides some contradictions. Indeed inclusion is viewed as an expectation and desire but also as source of problems. As the data reveal,

> Although some teachers suggest opening the school to students rejected from other schools and think that diversity is a factor contributing to low achievement and problems of indiscipline, 90% of the teachers make a positive evaluation of the inclusion policy, pointing to it as one of the greatest virtue of this school. . . . this school role regarding inclusion is thus valued as combating exclusion (PE99/02, p 34).
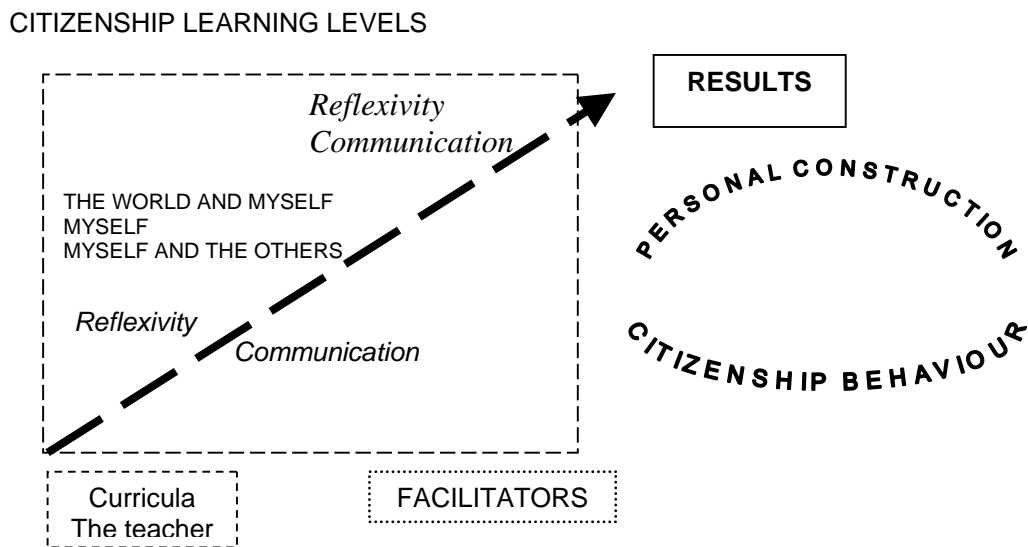
A similar contradiction was found in relation to the third vector, promoting school success for all and accepting students who were rejected by other schools. The teachers

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appear to identify with this educational local policy, expressing a hegemonic belief in the students' success. Yet when the school data does not show satisfactory results, this policy becomes a main problem. In their view, inclusive school policies raise dilemmas that cross the internal and external contexts of school and make effective solutions hard to find and implement. Paradoxically, it is a problem that derives from the major virtue of this school: openness to heterogeneity and concern with inclusion. The central paradox, then, originates in the contradiction between two distinct situations: the desire to promote and attain equality of opportunities for all and the apparent invincible reality of external social inequities.

Levels of citizenship learning: the secondary school students' views

The second research question regards the places in the curriculum where students learn about citizenship. This section reports data from a set of open-ended questions give to secondary school students, 10th to 12th grades only (*n*=220). The results show the secondary school students' differential perspectives regarding the citizenship dimensions. In answer to the question 'In which discipline do you best learn to be a citizen?', most students (66.5%) related the learning of citizenship to one or more disciplines in the school curricula, while 22% considered that *all* disciplines contributed to this learning. By contrast, 11.5% of students affirmed that they did not learn citizenship in *any* of them. Students mentioned several disciplines such as Philosophy (n=63), Portuguese language (n=29), History (n=5) and Economic and Social Development (n=5). The content of these disciplines, and the crucial role the teachers played, appeared to be in these students' perspectives the elements with a greater learning potential. The first two disciplines occupy a more relevant place because they offer a transversal method composed by and centred in reflexive and communicative competences. To this extent, as Figure 1 illustrates, they facilitate learning citizenship in dimensions pertaining to the *self*, the *self and the world*, and *the self and the others*. The relevance of teacher's role lies in starting and enriching classroom debates and involving students in social and pedagogical dialogue; and also through understanding, helping, and modelling.

Some students (n=44) consider that citizenship may be learned about in all disciplines. For them, it is the sum of curricular knowledge associated with the teachers' modelling exemplar that make the most in learning citizenship. Other students (n= 23) diverged from this view. Their understanding was that this kind of preparation in neither discipline-oriented nor the school's responsibility. One 'learns with life and from the examples of older people, such as my parents and my grandparents' (11D6,F, 16 years old); or, as another student states, 'one doesn't learn to become citizen in a school subject . . . it is something that one learns as time goes by; the school is not the only one to teach this' (11D7,M, 16 years old).

Figure 1. Students' view of learning citizenship in school

CITIZENSHIP LEARNING LEVELS

Regardless specific disciplines, learning citizenship is structured in reference to three main axes: (a) a *practical* and *social* level which articulates self and the world and is conducive to knowledge and the person's integration in reality; (b) a *personal* level which facilitates self knowledge; and (c) an *interpersonal* level which harmonises the relationships with the others and makes them more profound and meaningful. The first level regards learning 'to understand and see certain aspects around us better, without which what we study in this discipline could not be imagined' (10D3, F, 16 years old), particularly when focusing on the analysis of social matters, the comprehension of actual events, and reflection on daily problems. All these pedagogical components are viewed as instruments that enlarge cultural understanding, foster knowledge of the world and a gradual social integration of the person. Yet, note the absence of references to science, art, and technology issues at this level of learning.

Learning citizenship at the *personal level* refers to acquiring and developing self-knowledge, enlarging personal perspectives, changing prior ways of thinking and learning to express personal thinking in own terms. This kind of learning implies, in a student's phrase (10D, F, 15 years old), 'growing' in autonomy, as this is an essential foundation towards becoming a full citizen. The *interpersonal level* associates with knowledge of the world. However, it attains a larger and deeper dimension, of an ethical and axiological nature, in terms of practical and social relationships. Learning to be a citizen goes beyond 'understanding people' (10C6, M, 16 years old); Indeed, 'one learns the values of our society' and prepares for 'abiding by the societal norms' (11C1,F, 17 years old).

Conclusions

An analysis of these results shows that the idea of citizenship, as expressed both in the Blue School educational project and shared by the majority of teachers, is built upon a

dominant sense of belonging and inclusion. Conceived in terms of an intercultural community, this school emerges and acts as a social place in which communication and interrelationships constitute prerequisites to achieve the main tenets of this school local policy: (a) harmonising diversity; (b) valuing a *caring* pedagogy focusing on the student's social, affective, intellectual, and axiological growing; and (c) viewing school as a democratic organisation. The students' data revealed different perspectives, but also an abstract and encompassing conception of citizenship, concerning rules for conviviality, for dealing with diversity and divergence, and a pedagogical use of reflexivity and communication. Yet, despite a policy directed towards inclusion, a mismatch between equity and success was a source of problems and deception. This contradiction may, to a certain extent, correspond to a similar contradiction between official rhetoric and practical means.

A local vision of citizenship. However, the analysis also found some gaps and omissions as far as the school policy and the secondary school students' answers permit us to know. One aspect regards a narrow view of citizenship, which tends to exclude the political dimension of citizenship education, either in terms of the political, jurisdictional or organisational structures of the country. Although the school documents explicitly referred to the rights and duties of conviviality, the democratic values of political participation and commitment were absent in these data. Similarly, European and global dimensions were apparently ignored.

Despite an internal policy that centres on diversity, this school focuses on and engages in a local view of citizenship. Furthermore, it appears to be conforming and expressing an ideal construction of the student. According to such an ideal and desirable profile, each student is expected to be an autonomous citizen, capable of solidarity and world-wide openness attitudes, harmoniously integrated in society, and responsible a co-responsible for a positive multicultural school climate. In synthesis, these results indicate that learning of citizenship in the Blue school still has a long way to develop and gain holistic understandings both in curricular practices and students' experiences.

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